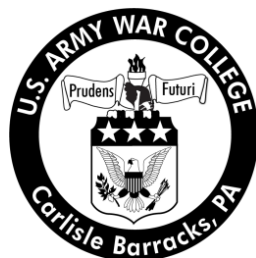


Strategy Research Project International Fellow

Cooperation on New Bases in the Wider Black Sea Region

by

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United States Army War College
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Abstract

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Cooperation on New Bases in the Wider Black Sea Region

It is the eternal dispute between those who imagine the world to suit their policy, and those who arrange their policy to suit the realities of the world.”¹

—Albert Sorel (Carr 1964: 11)

Introduction

During the Cold War period, the Wider Black Sea Region (WBSR) was not an area of major geopolitical importance due to specific conditions. But, geopolitical changes, particularly the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia resulted in an increase in the number of regional actors and opened WBSR to new political changes and transformations. Moreover, since 2004 three of the six states bordering the Black Sea have become NATO members, and since January 1st 2007, the borders of the European Union (EU) are on Black Sea shores.

WBSR has now become a meeting point of interests not only from countries bordering the Black Sea but also from many global players.

Today, WBSR is the primary geographic area where the interests of the Western democracies and Russia collide, and where disagreement between them is most pronounced. Although the Cold War struggle has long passed, distrust and confrontation at a smaller scale continues to persist. Apparently, the two parties are unable to understand each other fully despite the fact they have many more common interests on the political agenda than disputes. Accordingly, the way they manage these disputes along the new NATO and EU borders will very much depend on their future relationship as well as the global political and security order. To gain a better understanding of the regional challenges, opportunities, and viable solutions, this study examines the common issues associated with the wider Black Sea region, the Russian

perspective, the value of Russia as a Reliable Partner, and the need for a new approach in developing cooperation with Russia. None of the problems are intractable, but they do require understanding, patience, and a commitment to the rule of law.

Wider Black Sea Region Common Issues

There is not a strict geographical delineation of WBSR on which scholars can agree. However, for many scholars the expression WBSR refers mainly to a political-economical entity rather than a geographical one.² Consequently, no comprehensive analysis on the subject can ignore the diplomatic, economic, military, and social interconnections existing among states bordering the Black Sea and between these states and the states near the Black Sea.³ Therefore, while recognizing a degree of geographic separation, the WBSR as an entity is flexible, meaning it could include not only the states bordering the Black Sea, but also states from the Balkans, Aegean Sea, and even Eastern Mediterranean, in the West, as well as states from the Caucasus and Central Asia, to the East.⁴

As it is the bridge between Europe and East Asia (a region of increasing global interest), WBSR serves as the transit corridor for the crucial Caspian and Central Asian hydrocarbon trade to Europe. Accordingly, the European Union considers the Black Sea region an area of strategic importance for its energy supply security.⁵ Naturally, greater trade and interaction with the EU raises the need to deal with organized trans-border crime, such as trafficking in human beings, arms and drugs, illegal migration, illicit waste disposal, and industrial pollution.⁶

As a consequence of the 9/11 terror attacks and subsequent Global War on Terror, WBSR has become “an irreplaceable access corridor for American-led and NATO forces to bases and operation theatres in Central Asia and the Greater Middle

East.”⁷ But WBSR is not simply a corridor. It is also a borderland, a seam between Christianity and Islam, making WBSR the first line of European defense against radical Islamic extremism and Iranian nuclear threat, and in this context against terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

In view of the plethora of regional and international issues, the geopolitical importance of WBSR becomes obscured. Crucially important issues shaping the relationships between West and Russia, such as the conflict in Afghanistan, the competition for energy resources, and the defense against ballistic missiles appear to have overriding importance. Yet, the most important and foremost feature of the WBSR and the key to unlocking all the gates to a fruitful relationship is its “frozen conflicts.”

WBSR’s frozen conflicts are a legacy of “the end of the history” era, unleashed at the end of Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union thrust this part of the world into an identity crisis, as Samuel Huntington put it.⁸ From Kosovo to Transdniestria, and continuing with Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, the demons of instability threaten Europe’s dream of peace and cooperation. Today, these chronic conflicts, especially those of the Caucasus, “provide the most likely flashpoints in the Eurasia region.”⁹

“Frozen conflicts” refers to enduring antagonisms which have become latent or manifest into sporadic armed confrontations, mainly because the parties involved are exhausted from previous conflicts or because of external pressure from regional or global powers.¹⁰ “Frozen conflicts” within the WBSR share some common features:

- Their roots can be traced to the communist era. The communist regimes, in the case of the Stalin government in a dramatic manner, redrew borders

without taking in consideration the ethnic and historical realities, and changed ethnic demographics by using deportation and colonization, among other means.

- They are based on ethnic rivalries.
- “Victim states” were forced into conflict because no alternative options were available. Separatists intentionally escalated the armed conflict in order to draw in the regular forces of affected states.¹¹ “Victim states” refers to United Nations member states which are unable to control a portion of their sovereign territory as a result of a war of secession.
- These newly created separatist “states” cannot function or survive without substantial support from outside benefactor states.
- Control over the territory of separatist states is maintained by force with the overwhelming help coming from outside benefactors.
- In this play benefactors participate “in the dual role of party to and arbiter of the conflicts.”¹²

Above all, the tragedy is, these breakaway entities could easily become safe havens for illicit activities in addition to the fact that they drain economic resources and political energies from their weak “victim states” and their impoverished societies.¹³

Despite the rhetoric of human rights and conflict prevention, neither the United States nor the EU has ever put the issue of solving the “frozen conflicts” on top of its bilateral agendas with Russia.¹⁴ Curiously for the Western democracies, striving to maintain a post-communism status-quo only serves to perpetuate and legitimize the communist era abuses. Thus, the tensions from these “frozen conflicts” continue to build

and will have dire consequences. If the external pressure, which keeps the internal tensions contained, is ever released, the resulting explosion will engulf neighboring states and beyond, threatening to destabilize the entire region.

While it is in the best interests of the West to resolve these “frozen conflicts,” they must contend with Russia, which bitterly opposes any interference in its affairs. In order to proceed with solving these challenging issues the West and especially the United States must first understand Russia’s attitude.

Understanding Russia’s Attitude

Immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia turned its face to the West. Boris Yeltsin had pursued a policy of integration with the West because this was seen as “the leading civilization that merited their prime foreign policy attention.”¹⁵ In the aftermath of a traumatic communist experience, Russia wanted to engage the West in essentially liberal policies and demonstrate its willingness to become a member of the Western nations.¹⁶ But the western powers’ response was not as expected, at least from the Russian point of view.

Despite U.S. verbal assurances to Gorbachev that NATO would not extend to the east, NATO enlargement did just that.¹⁷ This was perceived by Russians as a U.S. triumphalist stance that ignored Russian interests, and threatened Russia’s security. But, for many post-Cold War American political leaders, who had ironically inherited a “mind-set of rivalry and confrontation” with the Soviet Union, Russia’s opposition to NATO enlargement appeared to be a Cold War attitude.¹⁸ Very few seriously believed that there was a real desire from Russia “to be a member of the Western world.”¹⁹

Faced with internal opposition The Kremlin shifted towards a foreign policy of Great Power Balancing.²⁰ Moscow aimed to balance American hegemony by reintegrating with the former Soviet states—which heretofore had been neglected due to ingratiating with the West—under Russian leadership and gaining the support of other powerful states like China and India.²¹ This was the moment when Putin came into power.

In Putin's view Russia is a great power, and the West must not take Russia for granted. For him the idea of an anti-American balancing coalition was seen as counterproductive, so he switched to a policy of Great Power Pragmatism.²² Instead of balancing against the United States, Putin pursued "economic modernization for the sake of preserving the great power status."²³ Confronted with what Russians perceived as the West's offensive to the East, Putin moved from defensive cooperation to assertiveness, insisting that the western powers accept of Russia's interests.²⁴ This explains why the Kremlin, in recent years has pursued the defense of Russian "regions of privileged interests" and "more independent economic and security policies in the world."²⁵

As the sole global superpower, the United States was increasingly less inclined to take Russia's interests into account. At the same time the Kremlin became increasingly frustrated with its inability to establish a satisfactory common ground with the West. It had no recourse but to accept unilateral actions of the western powers that the Kremlin perceived as humiliating: the war in the Balkans and Serbia's punishment; two rounds of NATO expansion; the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002; the NATO military presence in central Asia; the invasion of Iraq; and plans to deploy

elements of nuclear missile defense in Eastern Europe.²⁶ It became quite evident that the majority of Russian complaints centered on western military actions in WBSR. Furthermore, Putin decried the U.S. involvement in Caucasus through its military support to Georgia and Azerbaijan (e.g., two billion dollars in military assistance to Georgia and the disclosed development of its counterinsurgency capabilities).²⁷ Also, U.S. involvement in the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and the plans to cultivate Georgia's membership into NATO, were perceived as an affront to Russia's security interests.²⁸

For Russia, NATO expansion threatened the balance of power in the Caucasus at the expense of Russia's interests.²⁹ Yet, the straw that broke the camel's back was the West's unilateral recognition of Kosovo independence, which proved to Russia "that concessions to the U.S. were not reciprocated, but used to promote U.S. dominance in the world."³⁰ In Russia's view, Kosovo established a dangerous precedent.³¹ Russia found itself ignored, which accounts for Dimitri Medvedev's statement in the wake of the Russia-Georgia conflict: "We will not tolerate any more humiliation, and we are not joking."³² The imprudent policies of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili gave Russian leaders the opportunity to change the post-Cold War dialogue between Russia and the West. Of consequence was Russia's "recognition of South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence . . . justified on the principle of a mistreated minority's right to secession—the principle Bush had established for Kosovo."³³ More poignantly, "international law was silent in the Caucasus because it had been silent regarding Yugoslavia, attacked without approval of the United Nations, of which Russia is a member."³⁴

Relationships between Russia and the West were at an impasse because the West, in particular Washington, had made a “crucial error . . . to treat post-Soviet Russia as a defeated enemy” which Russians never consider themselves to be.³⁵

Russian mistrust of the West seems to be supported not only by the facts but also the words that are behind these deeds. Russian leaders have the right to be circumspect since former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski defended NATO’s expansion as “necessary to assist the United States in controlling the Eurasian continent because it has most of the world’s energy resources and because all the historical pretenders to global power originated in Eurasia.”³⁶

Western attitudes have also had a negative impact on Russian public opinion. In turn, Russian leaders bluntly reflect this public disquietude towards the West.³⁷ For example, in concert with Russian attitudes regarding Georgia “many Russian commentators with government ties express the conviction that Washington’s single objective in the Caucasus is to push Russia out of the region, and that the Kremlin must act alone by confronting US policies.”³⁸ It has become apparent in Russian politics that “embracing closer relations with the West is no way to boost your popularity in Russia,”³⁹ which is illustrative of the Russian presidential elections in 2012. Medvedev’s apparent friendly attitude towards the Obama Administration opened the way for Putin to win the presidency again.

Why it is Worthwhile to Make Russia a Reliable Partner

In an increasingly challenging international environment, it is more prudent to minimize uncertainty. Russia is undoubtedly one actor which demands as much certainty as possible. With its vast territories and enormous natural resources, in many

aspects, Russia is simply too big to be challenged, “and that limits Western ability to influence its developments.”⁴⁰ Factoring in its enormous nuclear arsenal, it becomes very clear why Russia will continue to have considerable maneuver room in the foreign policy realm.⁴¹ Consequently, it behooves the West to partner with Russia in at least three geographic areas: the Black Sea and the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Far East.

Regarding the Black Sea and the Caucasus, with the exception of the 2008 summer military clash in Georgia, Russia’s policy in the region does not have a military dimension, but rather is energy related.⁴² By employing diplomatic means, leveraging economic issues, and exploiting ethnical and religious disputes, Russia has created an area of “controlled instability,” aiming to deter NATO and EU from securing strategic partnerships with its targeted “victim states,” viz. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova.⁴³ Marginalizing the role of regional states and global actors in the Black Sea area, Russia seeks to compel the “victim states” to abandon the quest for NATO collective defense and rely instead on individual security, of course subject to the Kremlin’s interests.⁴⁴

The Russian intervention in Georgia demonstrated that Russia wields sufficient leverage over the major European states to make them react cautiously. And the instrument of power is energy resources. A number of EU member countries are already heavily dependent on Russian natural gas, and that dependence is deepening. As a recent study noted: “The WBSR plays a crucial role in this context, because it is the only area in Europe’s vicinity that has the potential to serve as a key producer and transit area for new sources of European gas supplies.”⁴⁵

In this respect Russia deftly exploited the European Union's incoherent energy policy in regards to hydrocarbon supplies for the domestic market. Because the Nabucco natural gas pipeline project was postponed sine die, and the Europeans were disunited, Russia stepped in and nearly monopolized Europe's energy needs. Thus projects, such as North Stream, South Stream (both in the execution phase), and Blue Stream (already in use), will bind Europe to Russian gas resources, underscoring European dependence on Russian gas supplies. At the same time these projects help Russia bypass the land routes through Ukraine and Poland as well as placing Central Asian gas producers in a position of dependence on Russian infrastructure. This gives the Kremlin a predominant role in this domain with substantial foreign policy implications toward Europe, WBSR, and Central Asia. "Unless alternative delivery options are constructed to bring natural gas from fields in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan to Europe," warned the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, "Russia is likely to fill the vacuum by controlling the transportation of this region's gas – using its monopoly position in Central Asia to buy gas cheaply and its monopoly of supply in Europe to sell gas at several times the price to Europe. Thus, Moscow would make a large profit while increasing its political leverage over both Europe and the states of Central Eurasia."⁴⁶

However, Russian dependence on hydrocarbons exports is a double-edged sword as Thane Gustafson sees it. The Russian economy and state are acutely vulnerable to any decline in profits coming from this source as only oil provides nearly 40 percent of the government's tax revenues.⁴⁷ For the Kremlin hydrocarbons are both a source of domestic development and geopolitical influence abroad.⁴⁸ For the near term,

hydrocarbons will remain Russia's main source of revenues and geopolitical leverage, so it is easy to understand the Kremlin's desire to monopolize the energy market to Europe and its determination to control the flow of gas and oil through Caucasus and Black Sea.

Nevertheless, changing the balance of power in the region—and by this increasing the chances of blocking an expected Russian gas monopoly or Russian support for its “puppets”—is problematic since the 1936 Treaty of Montreux prohibits the military presence of non-littoral states in the Black Sea. Hence, neither the United States nor any Western European state can compete in the Black Sea.⁴⁹

In this respect Russia has found an unexpected ally. Turkey is another player in the region which is trying to keep the United States away. Apparently seeking to prevent the militarization of the Black Sea, Turkey is pursuing pan-Turkish policies in the former Soviet space and a strategy of “zero problems” on its borders.⁵⁰ Ankara's dream is to “leverage Turkey's geostrategic location in the center of Eurasia, as well as its historical Ottoman ties and Muslim affinities, to give Turkey “strategic depth” and wider influence.”⁵¹ Seizing the opportunity, the Kremlin has been encouraging Ankara to pursue this course viz. the growing Turkish maritime capabilities in the Black Sea, because “Russia does not want to see a further shift of the military balance in its neighborhood in the West's favor.”⁵² “In fact, Moscow has sought to benefit maximally from Turkish disenchantment with the U.S. and EU, and is likely to continue to do so.”⁵³

Since Russia and Turkey are the dominate actors in the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation, they have no desire to include the United States in its security arrangements.⁵⁴ Using the umbrella of Organization of Black Sea Economic

Cooperation, Russia and Turkey have restricted EU and NATO influence in the region. Furthermore, this kind of bilateral arrangement has stymied real economic benefits for the other member states and has made it ineffective as a mechanism for regional crisis management.⁵⁵ So, for the United States, the Black Sea area will remain restricted unless it engages directly with every country in the region, especially with Russia which remains the central actor.

However, the resolution of the “frozen conflicts” will bring huge energy benefits to Europe, and diminish the Russian-Turkish monopoly. Normalization of the political situation in the WBSR will open new alternatives for energy transportation in the region, and for Europe the greater the diversification of energy sources, the better is energy security. This means opening Armenia for the transit of Iranian gas and securing Georgia for investments in the AGRI project, which is in its final stage of development and will transport huge quantities of liquefied Central Asian gas through Romania into the heart of Europe. Opening up these new sources of energy will diminish Europe’s dependency on Russia and Turkey. It will take away their monopoly and force them to compete for European customers.

In Central Asia the situation is straightforward. The United States depends on Russia’s substantial influence in the region, through which NATO supply lines run for coalition forces in Afghanistan.⁵⁶ This northern route serves as an alternative to the Pakistani route, and has proven to be increasingly valuable in the last years, particularly given Pakistan’s unstable nature. As a representative of the State Department observed, “Russia’s transit support for NATO Allies and our ISAF partners has been

critical to the mission's success."⁵⁷ However, evolutions in this area depend on NATO presence in Afghanistan which is planned to conclude in 2014.

The Far East is particularly interesting because of recent developments.

Heretofore, the Asian continent had witnessed no great power competition in the post-Cold War period. However, with the latest economic transformations and especially the rise of China, this is now an issue of great concern.⁵⁸

While the United States may not view a strategic partnership with Russia in the Asia-Pacific as particularly useful, it would be imprudent to translate this into policy because trajectories in the region are unpredictable and one adversary less counts.⁵⁹ So, even though Russia is a small economic player in the region, Russian analyst Dimitri Tretin warns that "largely ignoring Russia in the strategic calculus of the Asia-Pacific, as the United States does today, is short-sighted."⁶⁰

China's nuclear capabilities remain a major point of concern for strategic analysts, an issue which the Obama administration seems oblivious of. They argue that by reducing American nuclear capabilities based solely on negotiations with Russia, "the administration is damaging America's deterrent capabilities, which have historically been the keystone of the Asian balance of power and regional stability."⁶¹ But strategic discussions with China, not only on nuclear capabilities, but also on space capabilities and cyber security will be less conclusive without Russia's involvement.⁶² Aside from tightening the reins on China, this approach will push toward "transparency for nuclear arsenals and their associated activities, which formed the bulk of strategic discussions between Washington and Moscow."⁶³

For now, the Chinese have a comfortable relationship with Russia, but as Washington develops its Asia-Pacific policy, it will find greater leverage with Beijing if Russia becomes a free agent.

A New Approach in Developing Cooperation with Russia

After suffering years of humiliation by the West, Moscow is trying to shift the balance of power at least in the WBSR. While the United States remains distracted by the lengthy and open-ended commitments caused by the Global War on Terror, Moscow has been employing its instruments of power to gain control over the “sphere of privileged interests,” and the war with Georgia was an important step toward the realization of this goal.⁶⁴

Even while struggling with domestic economic problems and shifting its attention to the Asia-Pacific region, the United States should not forget its obligations as a global leader to address latent issues in the WBSR where “the demons of the past—like ethnic tensions, nationalism, racism, and extremism—are not dead,” but just waiting a favorable moment to set the region in turmoil.⁶⁵ Failure to initiate conflict prevention in the WBSR would reflect badly on U.S. leadership. U.S. interests will not be served by perpetual instability, tensions, and conflict in the WBSR. In this regard, cooperation with Russia is an imperative U.S. interest.

The Georgia war severely strained the Russian-American relationship, but much common ground exists so hope still exists.

Having a better understanding of the situation, the Obama administration pushed the “reset” button regarding its relations with Russia. Even though the Obama administration’s engagement initiatives with Russia seem modest, they have achieved

dramatic results.⁶⁶ The most immediate changes in U.S. diplomacy include “altering the tone that surrounds the handling of dispute; treating Russia as a potential partner in addressing shared challenges, instead of approaching Moscow with demands; and emphasizing transparency when it comes to US goals and plans.”⁶⁷ As a result of this cordial relationship, Russia supported the United Nation Security Council Resolution 1929, which set the toughest-ever sanction regime on the Iranian nuclear program. Russia expanded the development of new transit corridors to support U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and agreed to the New START treaty, which called for reductions in offensive nuclear arsenals.⁶⁸ The prospects for further cooperation are promising. To be certain, there are issues on which the West and Russia still differ, but it is very clear for to both sides that “NATO is not a threat to Russia, nor Russia to NATO.”⁶⁹ As a result of the total reset in the Russia-U.S. relationship, a window of opportunity exists for a resolution of the issues plaguing the WBSR.

Today, the competition between Russia and the Western democracies is no longer “determined by any overarching global competition, structurally determined by a global balance of power, or by the ideological competition.”⁷⁰ As President Obama noted, Russia is not the Soviet Union. That means Russia is no longer an enemy. Russia recognizes U.S. superiority and does not want to challenge this globally. The Kremlin’s intentions are clear and openly declared and this is in stark contrast to the inscrutability of Beijing. Despite alarmist fears of a resurgent Russia, the reality is “Russia’s strength is fragile, resting as it does on unfavorable demographic trends, a single-commodity economy based on hydrocarbon extraction, and a lack of serious investment in repairing its crumbling infrastructure.”⁷¹ Militarily, Russia is maintaining “a

force only 20 percent smaller than that of the United States military on a budget 1/15th the size of the U.S. defense budget. Even with the shift toward equipping the force with modern systems, procurement accounts for only 30 percent of the Russian defense budget, compared to 54 percent in the United States.”⁷² But above all, the fact that both partners have found so much ground for cooperation since 2009 sets the conclusion that they are only few steps away from a real partnership. What hinder this possibility are these issues in the WBSR which they surprisingly avoid to solve.

In this case, a serious review of U.S. foreign policy towards Russia is called for. As Andrey Tsygankov laments, “Instead of single-mindedly expanding US and Western military power up to Russia’s borders or trying to derail Moscow’s policies,” Washington would do well to develop a joint assessment with Russia of military and energy risks in the Caucasus and rather than accusing Russia of causing problems. “It is essential to find ways of working with the Kremlin to stabilize the strategically important region.”⁷³ Subscribing to a military solution for every problem will only make Russia respond in the same manner. For example, the U.S. abrogation of the ABM Treaty and plans for deploying missile defense systems in former Warsaw Pact member countries prompted Russia to threaten to pull out of the INF Treaty and the CFE Treaty. Furthermore, “during 2010-2011, Russian forces in what is now called the South Military District were 70 percent rearmed with new weapons (the rest of the army is only modernized by 16 percent).”⁷⁴

Returning to WBSR’s “frozen conflicts,” it is noteworthy that as U.S. experiences in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq demonstrate, “it is necessary to see regional conflicts for what they are, identifying their local, indigenous roots, and to avoid simplistically

fitting them into a Cold War framework.”⁷⁵ In terms of U.S. foreign diplomacy, some new ways for cooperation in the WBSR should be envisioned. Why just for United States? Obviously because given the values it chooses to promote and its role as the leading nation of the international community, all the other actors will expect it to take the initiative and confront all the challenges.

First of all, U.S. foreign diplomacy must acknowledge that it should give priority to this region for reasons previously mentioned. Of course, there will always be some common ground with Russia but it will not take the place of a true partnership. To solve the problem the United States must find ways to address and not ignore it in the hope that it will resolve itself.

Second, work on each case separately by engaging Russia directly, one subject at a time. Confer with Russia bi-laterally regarding solution sets before moving to open the discussion with the interested parties and with other regional actors. Experience in this area has been demonstrated that trying to solve the “frozen conflicts” by regional forums is waste of time.

From Vladimir Socor’s perspective, “The existing political mechanisms for settlement-negotiation have only served to postpone a resolution indefinitely. These formats are putting the freeze not so much on hostilities as on political settlements.”⁷⁶ Moreover, Stephen Blank, a noted Russian scholar, illustrates this point, writing that “analysts like Svante Cornell and Zeyno Baran say that both Armenia and Azerbaijan trust only the United States and that Azerbaijan believes that the only way to a solution is through negotiations among the big powers.”⁷⁷

Socor also laments that thus far Western engagement in the region appears contradictory to its strategic values: “The West has faintly hoped for a deal (however elusive) with the rogue-statelet authorities, rather than promoting democratization in the breakaway areas.”⁷⁸ Moreover, the West does not insist on adherence to the rule of law: “Throughout the region, Russia’s forces and the forces of unrecognized statelets are out of bounds to verification. The OSCE, powerless to ensure compliance with the troop withdrawal commitments and weapons ceilings, tends instead to condone the breaches.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, “the Russian-controlled breakaway statelets are highly authoritarian and militarized, and their populations confined to a Moscow-centered informational environment.”⁸⁰ These local governments and population count on Russian military support, and Russia is more than happy to provide it. In this respect, regarding the Moscow-Istanbul commitments, the Kremlin points out that Russia’s pledges to withdraw its military forces from the Republic of Moldova and Georgia are not considered legal documents, but only political expediency. And this is just one of the aspects which make the collective regional settlements for “frozen conflicts” resolution no longer credible.

Engaging Russia directly and bilaterally regarding WBSR challenges is likely to make the Kremlin feel like a real partner not as an adversary whose relationship with the United States is based on a case-by-case “limited partnership where cooperation and competition co-exist on a fluid continuum.”⁸¹ Russians expect from Washington a true sign of detachment from Cold-War era stereotypes and not just cooperation on a fluctuating basis, driven by an immediate need. Developments in this area will call for greater acceptance of American cultural, social, and political values inside Russian

society. But to make such a scenario work, deeds must accompany words. The diplomatic action should be doubled by economic measures.

Russia is blessed with vast reserves in oil and natural gas but lacks the capacity to exploit them, especially in the Far East and in the Arctic. In search of revenues, which have been affected by the recent economic crisis, the Kremlin is ready to open this economic sector to foreign partners. This is a great opportunity for American entrepreneurs to develop cooperation on a huge scale with Russian counterparts, and the first step has already been made.

In the first part of 2012 a major deal with immense potential for revenues was signed between ExxonMobil and Rosneft. The deal concerns joint participation in projects in the Arctic, Black Sea, United States, and Canada.⁸² It is a big step forward but relatively small compared to the real potential for economic cooperation. More steps should follow in the direction of bilateral trade. But an increase in bilateral economic ties, which for the United States currently comprises less than one percent of its international trade, will only be made if Cold-War era stereotypes are overcome. To date Congress hasn't moved to grant Russia Permanent Normal Trading Relations and the United States remains the only WTO member to act like this with Russia.⁸³

A direct diplomatic engagement supported by strong economic ties and major direct capital investments is more likely to persuade Moscow to settle the issues in the WBSR rather than pursuing a specific anachronistic Cold War era policy.

Third, do not use different scales for the same type of problem.

The strongest criticism of Russia regarding the complex situation in WBSR is its disregard for the rule of law.

This disregard for the rule of law underscores the biggest issue in the WBSR – the “frozen conflicts.” But these conflicts cannot be solved in a classic framework because of those who remain committed in their “support of the territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty” of countries like Georgia based upon “the principles and the norms of international law, the United Nation Charter, and the Helsinki Final Act” while for others, like Serbia, these principles are denied.⁸⁴

Unfortunately, the West provided a precedent for Russia to disregard rule of law in the case of Kosovo, because Moscow can now use self-determination with similar cases to justify its actions. In fact the problem is older and started with the recognition of former Yugoslav and Soviet states. As a caveat, the separation of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak republics was a civil agreement, meaning no outside powers compelled the divorce. Moreover, these states were not signatures of the Helsinki Final Act at the time of secession, and they did not possess legal agreements with their neighbors. Still, the international community should not have recognized them so readily. Fundamentally, the frontiers inside Yugoslavia and Soviet Union were not the result of an historic process but rather an arbitrary decision of the domestic Communist Party establishment; they were internal administrative borders and not internationally recognized boundaries. So in the particular case of these new states, which are hostages to the “frozen conflicts,” an enduring solution or series of adjustments through outside arbitration is necessary. This solution should be approved unanimously by the initial signatories of the Helsinki Final Act. If not, the specter of the Kosovo precedent will undermine the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act.

Kosovo independence has created a dangerous precedent. No wonder that five EU member states, four of which are also NATO members, have not recognized Kosovo's independence. Opening Pandora's Box is always dangerous and regional paradoxes do not stop there. While the vast majority of Kosovo's citizens are Albanian, by resolution they are not allowed to unite their state with Albania even if they wanted to. At same time Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and Croats are obliged to live in the same state, Bosnia-Herzegovina, even if they do not want to.

These cases together with the others in the WBSR call for a resolution outside the Helsinki final Act of 1975—a resolution which will not affect the original signatories. And of course, because the United States has pushed for this Kosovo solution, the United States is expected to take the lead and solve all the similar problems in the region. In this respect, the United States has no other recourse but to face Russia directly and forthrightly.

Just as Kosovo emerged in the Balkans, why should the West deny the same solution for the whole region? Why should it be a problem if other small states emerge on an adjusted or outside the Helsinki Final Act? It will mean the end of tensions in the region and a real containment of Russia's interests. Redrawing the borders is hard and painful, but in these cases it must always be an option on the table and a necessary topic of discussion. All accords must contain provisions to allow displaced populations to return to their ante-conflict places. Meanwhile, the Russian military presence in former secessionist statlets and newly recognized states will become obsolete. Furthermore, with little effort, these small weak states will no longer benefit from Moscow's economic assistance and will begin concentrating on domestic issues like

democratization. Thus, they will become more compliant with all international legislation, more controllable by the international community through existing verifiable mechanisms, and more responsible actors.

Of course, economic incentives coming from the West, especially from the United States will help the process. The West should be prepared to offer economic incentives for legitimate states that will accept the process.

Economic assistance to “victim states” is necessary even now to forestall economic blackmail. The main tool in this case is direct investment. Direct investments by American companies, in carefully targeted economic domains, relevant for local economy, are more effective than giving money directly to the central governments or funding some public projects. This is an important distinction because with direct financial assistance to governments, the United States would lack a control mechanism over the spending of money. Thus vast amounts of money would get lost in the thickets of bureaucracy, inviting corruption among the various levels of government. Taking in consideration the size of these states and their economies, major investments for them represent insignificant figures for the United States. Private investments granted by the U.S. government best serve U.S. interests in the region. Free market entrepreneurship has a solid record of economic growth and benefits to indigenous populations. In turn, this well-being among the populace translates into a favorable attitude towards and support for U.S. policies and actions in the region to the detriment of Russia. As Vladimir Socor instructs, “For building effective strategic partnerships it is necessary to enable these states to exercise full latitude of national decision-making on foreign

security policies, without risking countermeasures by Moscow or its armed local protégés.”⁸⁵

If conducted prudently, democratization of the region will foster confidence, cooperation, and institutional reforms, thereby mitigating Russian encroachments on regional actors as well as eliminating the need for Russian military bases. Finally, resolving the old “hard threats” permits these states to address the “new threats”—threats associated with international terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass-destruction, arms and drugs trafficking and related phenomena.⁸⁶

Finally, the West, especially the United States, should be prepared for a lengthy process. The results won’t come over night. The process will be difficult with likely setbacks along the way. “The West ought to be patient and not expect miracles,” warns Andrei Tsygankov. The preconceived ideas are not only on the Russian side. Both parties in the process must work to overcome the mistrust and cultural and political stereotypes. Tsygankov also warns about inappropriate behavior of Russia’s opponents in the United States which are responsible for deepening the “anti-Western Russian nationalist” stance.⁸⁷ To gain Russia as a reliable partner these practices should cease. Tsygankov concludes that in order to change Russian attitudes, a strategy towards Russia should rely on long term objectives which “are important to society as a whole, rather than the ruling elite only.”⁸⁸

Still, Dimitri Tretin is optimistic about the democratic trends even if “Russia is unlikely to experience another revolution.”⁸⁹ The majority of Russians are not eager to make radical changes. But as the latest research reveals, Russian society is changing

from the periphery. The change in the top will eventually come but it will be a long process as a succession of small social transformations all over the country.⁹⁰

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War has brought dramatic shifts for WBSR. When this vast area around the Black Sea emerged again, it still displayed to the world the ugly face of the communist legacy. Freed from the shackles of former totalitarian states, the indigenous people emerged from communism fighting to death to recover the national identity hitherto prohibited. Today the results of these ethnic wars are the “frozen conflicts” that became the main feature of WBSR. Overlapping this background are the geopolitical interests of the main international actors which are competing to control this corridor of energy resources flow. Western democracies would like to solve once and for all these “frozen conflicts,” but in this region they have to confront Russia which is simply too big to be brought on track.

Due to political evolutions in the region the dialog between the West and Russia almost froze. Incapable of understanding Moscow's attitude and stubbornly pursuing a resolution of WBSR issues in their own way, Western states have abandoned the region sine die in exchange for gaining the Kremlin's favors in other projects. What they obtain is Russia's cooperation on some secondary common ground, evolutions which will never bring Moscow and the West in a situation of true partnership. Despite the huge mutual benefits of a comprehensive partnership, the West and especially the United States, caught up in the Cold War era stereotypes, refuses to take decisive action in gaining Russia as a full partner. Changing the tide in the West-Russia relationship will

only be possible after the mutual accepted conclusion of WBSR's "frozen conflicts." This means a new diplomatic approach regarding Russia and this region.

A new approach for WBSR and Russia coming from the United States, as the single entity capable of dealing with the Kremlin, "will be especially effective when conducted on a reciprocal or mutually acceptable basis."⁹¹ This new approach should be based on the following principles:

- WBSR: a priority of American diplomacy.
- Treat each case separately: even though all regional "frozen conflicts" share common characteristics the interests around each one are different.
- Avoid using regional organizations: some parties in these organizations, not only Russia, have used the forum only to block the process.
- Leave home preconceived ideas: the Cold War is over and trying to use "double standards" with Russia is futile.
- Always achieve a bilateral agreement with Russia on each case before moving forward.
- Find positive ways to change the general attitude of Russians towards the United States: as the Kremlin attitude to the West has a large support among Russians it is essential to simultaneously engage the national Russian leadership and different levels of society, actions for which the use of economic means could prove vital.
- Have patience: after a long period of distrust, positive changes won't come over night.

As the United States is shifting its strategic weight to Asia-Pacific, not having a full partnership with Russia regarding WBSR issues is like turning the back on a wounded bear while facing a young and growing confident tiger. The situation is dangerous enough, so the United States should think twice about its options before it is too late. Moreover, the United States should take into account the implications of its policy over the nations living in the proximity of Russia's frontiers.

Russia might be a wounded bear today, but history never stands still. No matter the type of government or society, Russia is resilient and has the capacity to recover. Many times during the centuries Russia was brought to its knees, as many consider it to be today. But the lesson is, Russia came back stronger every time, and the last time, it was barely stopped west of Berlin. Furthermore, without exception, the ones who truly suffer are the nations living in its proximity because it happens that Russia never forgets an affront. But now the time is right, and the United States is strong enough to change the trend of history for good.

Only the United States can grant the spread of democracy, security, prosperity and the rule of law in the WBSR. All nations in the region, good or bad, big or small,, depending on one's perspective, are hoping that America will take a pragmatic approach to pacify the region. America owes this to them and for itself, and should not waste time and have the region settled once and for all, before is not too late.

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